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9/11: Mental health in the wake of terrorist attacks

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BOOK REVIEW

9/11: Mental health in the wake of terrorist attacks

Yuval Neria, Raz Gross, & Randall Marshall (Eds)

Ezra Susser (Guest Editor)

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006

646 pp., £60/\$110 hdbk

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-83191-8

The attack on the World Trade Centre was unpredictable. This book however was rather more predictable. "Trained counsellors" now descend on any traumatic incident at a remarkable response rate, leaving trained PTSD researchers panting along in their wake. Setting up single session psychological debriefing can be a very rapid process [though whether it serves any useful purpose is not really clear]. Getting grants for data analysis and producing academically respectable publications takes rather longer.

9/11 had an extraordinary impact on America mainly because Americans have grown up thinking of their country as invulnerable and of all other countries as being far away. For the same reason Pearl Harbour still has an extraordinary resonance for Americans, while its model, the Royal Naval air attack on Taranto, which actually had a far more devastating effect on the Italian fleet, is largely forgotten even by English or Italians.

One notable omission from this book is that there is no mention of the traumatic after-effect on people like me. Within a week of 9/11 it was, to put it mildly, forcibly drawn to my attention that walking around London with a brown skin and a bushy black beard was no longer a sensible option. The effects in America not just on Muslims but on Sikhs, Hindus, Parsees, and even Greek or Armenian clergymen etc was equally traumatic, but nobody seems to have considered debriefing us or giving us psychological support. The most sensible contribution to this bulky tome seems to me to be Simon Wessely's chapter on what mental health professionals should or should not do. Far too much of the rest seems to consist of accounts of people intervening because they feel that they ought to be doing something, rather than because they know that what they are doing is useful.

9/11 is a fading part of history now, though there are still rescuers who are being refused treatment for lung conditions because they weren't covered by insurance, while others are still getting long-term counselling. This book will continue to appeal to people working in the PTSD industry however. There is a lot of material here that is relevant to the ongoing situation in a wide variety of countries. My own personal feeling is that the natural reaction to a traumatic event is to be traumatized, and most people get over it. In the meantime, can I have my beard back?

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